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Guest editorial

The predicament of difference

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Speaking in 1989 on the relentless march of economic and cultural globalization, Stuart Hall noted its paradoxically multinational and de-centred character that issues a homogenizing, 'westernizing' logic and a fascination with proliferating difference as exotic, novel, and so on. This apparent contradiction or inconsistency is nothing of the sort: it testifies to the current historical and political conjuncture as a moment in the transformation of capital into mobile forms of power stretching across the entirety of human and social life; from financial markets to the free enterprise culture, from on-demand production to niche consumption, from the cornucopia of personal choices to the advent of 'lifestyle'. Most interestingly for Hall, this malleable front characterizes the effectiveness *and* Achilles heel of the hegemonic project given 'the fact that, at a certain point, globalization cannot proceed without learning to *live with and work through difference*' (1991a: 31, emphasis added).

The injunction to 'live and work with difference' is not, however, the sole prerogative of the globalization of capital and culture but also poses salient questions of the local and its protean subjects. In the midst of the continual human traffic and restless ideational flows evinced within the 'ethnoscapes' of the 'disjunctive' global cultural economy, the relative stabilities of filial, communal, and recreational associations are, as Arjun Appadurai informs us, 'everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion . . . these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wished to' (1990: 297). This points to a necessary acceptance and understanding of difference in a more profound sense, where the effective distinction between established normative groupings such as cultures, nationalities, and ethnicities is thoroughly disturbed. Thus the various intersections within increasingly complex social identities emphasize difference

as internal and external *processes* instead of *facts*. The complex multiplicity and *proliferation* of differences denote the unsettling of distinct subjectivities to the effect that reified, Manichean and monolithic identities as states of 'being' are strenuously contested by fluid forms of differentiation that correspondingly signify identities as processes of 'becoming' (Glissant, 1989; Hall, 1996). As such, the identities that are supposedly only relationally different are themselves subject to incessant movement that produces infinitesimal characteristics instead of discrete meanings.

Hall's interest in 'living with difference' is indicative of a broad range of social, political and intellectual developments that have unfolded in the course of the 20th-century. Whether we talk about the historical changes in the latter part of that century in terms of postmodernity, postcolonialism, or globalization, in terms of the break-up of the nation state or the age of global migrations, the rise of the new social movements or the advent of multiculturalism, it is undeniable that by the turn of the century 'difference' had become a central principle across the board, in critical thought as well as in practical politics. In what has become a landmark essay, African American philosopher Cornel West (1993) reflects upon the new social landscape identified by Hall and its demand for what he calls a 'new cultural politics of difference'. His characterization of this new kind of politics gives us a sense of the radical sentiments that are at the base of the shift, although it is presented more as an unfolding process than an epochal 'break':

> Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing. (West, 1993: 19)

It is important to signpost clearly what the idea of difference is expected theoretically to achieve in declarations such as these. The literal meaning of the term difference is 'being unlike or dissimilar', and as such it necessarily alludes to something which it is placed against, something which it is not. In this common sense understanding, difference is conceived in terms of an opposition between the same and the different, where the different is purely negatively defined as that which is not-same. In this sense, difference tends culturally and socially to be associated with the inferior, the deviant, the backward, thus positioned at the bottom end within a system of domination and hierarchy. It is this implicit and explicit devaluation of the different that critical theorists have attempted to overhaul. In the conceptual realm of late 20th-century cultural theory, which has been decisively influenced and moulded by poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers such as Derrida and others, invoking 'difference' has had the strategic intent of questioning and destabilizing the concept which is often positioned as its binary

opposite: 'identity'. In other words, difference as *différance* marks the emancipation of difference from 'the logic of identity' and its status as other-than. Indeed, by unsettling the very construction of binary oppositions and dichotomies – white/black; man/woman; self/other – the post-structuralist/postmodern theory of difference is meant to do away with the notion of identity as such in favour of an elevation of difference as a value in itself. By allowing difference to roam free, so it would seem, we will be liberated from the shackles of identity, operating as it does by imposing closed universes of fixed meanings. In West's terms, while the realm of identity signifies exclusionary homogeneity, essentialism and monolithic universalism, the world of difference promotes heterogeneity and multiplicity, the open-endedness of the historically conditional and contingent. In so far as we still need to keep talking about identities (plural), they are now routinely theorized as always in flux, in process, multiple and overdetermined – that is, subject to the ongoing (de)constructive work of difference. Such faith placed on difference and heterogeneity as vehicles of critical transformation and progressive change has been de rigueur in much critical discourse and cultural theory in the past few decades. As Rita Felski (1997: 1) has observed: 'Difference has become doxa, a magic word of theory and politics with redemptive meanings'.

With this special issue of *Ethnicities* we do not intend to enter the philosophical debate surrounding theories of difference: this debate has taken place in countless other fora and need not be our concern here. Instead, what we wish to examine is how the doxa of difference is played out in particular instances of the cultural politics of 'race' and 'ethnicity', that is, how difference, once it is taken as a social and political given, gives rise to a predicament over its unintended and unanticipated effects and consequences. Thus we speak about 'the predicament of difference' here to indicate the ambivalences and contradictions that the theoretical and political valorization of difference brings with it. To put it all too succinctly, these ambivalences and contradictions can be articulated in terms of two questions. The first question is a more empirical issue, referring to the obvious social persistence of identity despite its erasure in theory, while the second relates to the broader political implications of the primacy placed on difference and heterogeneity in critical thought.

In empirical terms we can ask: If there is indeed a 'triumph of difference over identity' (Felski, 1997: 1), how is it that we see around the world a strengthening and proliferation of claims to identity, a persistent and growing emphasis on and attachment to identities which define themselves as essentially separate, entirely distinct, from others? As James Clifford (1998: 369) has observed, 'for better and worse, claims to identity – articulations of ethnic, cultural, gender and sexual distinction – have emerged as things people, across the globe and the social spectrum, care about'. Indeed, identities are things that some people the world over are willing to die for!

This empirical social reality demands us 'to grapple with the real, present-day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt' (Calhoun, 1994: 14). Why is it, as Pnina Werbner (1997) has asked, that 'pure' identities remain so important, and why are such essentialisms so awfully hard to transcend? According to Manuel Castells (1997), what he calls 'the power of identity' in the contemporary world is a response to the destabilizing, fragmenting, and deconstructive forces of neoliberal and technology-induced capitalist globalization, which has led to the emergence and global diffusion of a network society characterized by the flexibility and instability of work, a culture of 'real virtuality', and the transformation of the material foundations of life 'through the constitution of a space of flows and a timeless time' (Castells, 1997: 1). The global surge of powerful expressions of collective identity in the past few decades can be seen, in Castells' view, as a challenge to this 'global whirlwind' on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. In other words, identities are only becoming *more*, not less important and salient as global capitalist culture is becoming constantly uprooted by flow and flux.

This sociological perspective sheds some disturbing light on the doxa of difference that has reigned in poststructuralist and postmodern theory. One could argue that the salutation of difference qua *différance* simply mirrors the relentlessly deconstructionist nature of dominant processes of globalization, rather than taking a radical critical stance to it. What Castells refers to as the conflicting yet coinciding trends of globalization and identity also raises question marks about the theoretical pursuit of difference without identity, difference as an autonomous force of freefloating flux. Is it really possible to do away with identity, in practice as well as in theory? Or is the very radical pluralism of the politics of difference merely conducive to the production of ever more particularist and self-defensive identities? Felski (1997: 17) points to the theoretical incoherence of the recourse to absolute difference 'because equality and difference, identity and otherness, and universality and particularity constantly infiltrate and implicate each other philosophically and politically'. In short, the predicament of difference here refers to the ongoing social power and cogency of identities in a world where the proliferation of difference rules, a predicament which Hall (1996: 2) describes as the contradiction of 'both the necessity and the "impossibility" of identities'.

This brings us to the second question related to the predicament of difference: What are the broader political implications of the primacy placed on difference and heterogeneity? To be sure, the new cultural politics of difference promoted so forcefully by West and others has not been without its critics from across the political spectrum. Resentment towards the perceived conventional limits for the expression of prevailing majority sentiments imposed by difference-speak is often maligned within populist

media such as conservative talk radio and tabloid journalism, slinging accusations of 'political correctness' in the direction of difference advocates. And this disaffection is notably mirrored within a wellspring of discontent amongst those speaking on behalf of progressive politics. For example, the perceived ascendancy of a set of insular claims to identity such as race (amongst other 'soft' categories such as sexuality) has been subject to a distinctive leftist moral-political disapproval. For its most strident critics, this shift signals a vacuous identity politics that has undermined the 'traditional' class-based coalition and its project of radical social change, as is reflected in the title of Todd Gitlin's (1995) book title, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*. In the USA, this objection is reinforced by unflattering observations of the exponential growth of a set of cathartic racial discourses driven by the 'self-help industry' that obscure the harsh (case social-material) realities of race and promote an inane therapeutic rhetoric of self-empowerment, individual growth, and emotional health that has given rise to a restrictive sensitivity towards diversity and has created a tense climate characterized by racial suspicion and (the fear of) admonition (Lasch-Quinn, 2001). The critique of difference in favour of a new emphasis on sameness and commonality is also articulated by British theorist Terry Eagleton (2000), who rails against 'the fetishization of cultural difference' and reinvokes Raymond Williams' idea of a 'common culture' as a necessary condition of social life and civil society.

Much of the discontent is especially directed at the presumably one-sided and narrow *cultural* emphasis of the new politics of difference. If difference was previously subsumed within the materialist problematic of (in)equality – such as (un)employment and labour rights, housing, education and so on – vis-à-vis class politics and race relations, it has now ascended (or descended, according to your viewpoint) to the symbolic realm of identity, recognition and representation. This is not to say that the latter has only recently come into existence, but rather to recognize that the pervasive preoccupation – institutional, collective and personal – with difference is a relatively recent phenomenon. Corporate mission statements, public policy edicts, voluntary sector rationales, and community action directives, for example, are suffused with statements of commitment to diversity and respect for difference. Similarly, individual practices and interpersonal relations have not remained exempt. Burgeoning interest in 'new age' spirituality, 'Eastern' metaphysical cultural practice such as yoga, and exotic mysticism collected under the rubric of 'holistic wellbeing' as well as our increasingly sophisticated and curious palates seeking out novel cuisines and exotic travel destinations all attest to an openness to, indeed hunger for, difference, at least in the wealthy West. And most importantly in the context of this journal and this special issue, the assumption and acceptance of cultural difference between different ethnicities has become a ubiquitous and, increasingly, a normalized aspect of life in western

democracies. A key plank of state-led recognition of difference is the policy of multiculturalism, which officially sanctions and enshrines ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences within the encompassing framework of the state. In this administrative-bureaucratic context, difference becomes the cornerstone of *diversity*: diversity is the managerial view of the field of differences to be harmonized, controlled and made to fit into a coherent (i.e. national) whole by the (nation) state. The celebration of cultural diversity – popularly expressed in multicultural community festivals and the love for world music (to be elaborated in one of the articles in this issue) – is an article of faith in self-identified multicultural societies. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1990: 208) have dismissed this official uptake of difference, arguing that 'the *creation* of cultural diversity' leads to the '*containment* of cultural difference' in a universalist framework. Even so, whether difference is conceived as diversity or as *différance*, in both cases it is morally and politically valorized as 'good'. What the critiques mentioned above call for is a reassessment of this unilateral and uniform approval: isn't difference also 'bad', and if so when and where? Or to put it differently, what is there still to gain from the commitment to difference and heterogeneity as an unconditional political goal?

There are further political entanglements and tensions to be teased out of the predicament of difference. As the bringing of myriad differences into vision is not simply for the analytical sake of properly mapping the social, we are also attentive to the exemplary political struggles for the recognition of complex social identities and relations – hybrid, transnational, diasporic, performative, and so on – as well as correspondent hegemonies. Bound up in this project is the question of the purposes or ends of bringing such specificities to light as correcting distortions of the facts of human existence and social formation as well as formulating their *qualities*. In other words, to what *ends* do we struggle over difference if not solely for purposes of analytical clarification? Are we simply engaged in an epistemological and ontological analysis of the vicissitudes of monism such as ethnocentrism, heteronormativity, monotheism, and the reification of purity situated within institutionalized feminist, postcolonial, cultural, and critical legal studies as well as spaces within 'traditional' disciplines such as sociology and anthropology? As legal scholar Davina Cooper has usefully argued, difference is best understood by situating it in relation to social legitimacy instead of – as is sometimes suggested – a simplistic and uncritical pluralism that either celebrates or affirms 'Others' (2004: 23–5). Diversity politics is thus firmly located as concerned with projects of freedom: positive freedom (*creating* conditions – such as targeted exemptions, entitlements, and resources); negative freedom (*eradicating* impediments – freedom *from* oppression); and freedom as practice (transgressive challenges to domination through the production and conduct of the self).

The predicament of difference, therefore, also alludes to the dilemma of

how to imagine freedom in relation to the diversity that is to be recognized. As the anthropologist Paul Rabinow (2003) reminds us, there is the unavoidable problem of how to think about things – in this case 'difference' – that avoids the traps of coercive stable 'solutions' yet accepts thinking about thinking as a social enterprise linked to palpable existential realities. In a schematic sense this might be summarized as the problematic of how to address the essentializing excesses of identity politics while retaining the laudable oppositional political spirit that stimulated its ascension into public life. However, the moral and ethical dimension implicit here is slightly incongruous with the broad poststructuralist, postmodern and post-marxist intellectual heritage of such a reflexive radical politics. This is evinced within what Nancy Fraser (2001) characterizes as the presumptive distinction between distributive approaches to multicultural justice as a morality of 'right' and claims to the recognition of difference as an ethics of the 'good' as a fight between arbitrary ideals of human fulfilment and the abstract principles of equal treatment. As the anti-humanist hallmark of postmodernist, poststructuralist and post-marxist paradigms cannot (and do not wish to) pin the subject down long enough to determine its essence, should a notion of human cultivation even be on the table? Or, similarly, is a *morality* of 'rights' or an ethics of the '*good*' simply an eschatological tributary leading back to the whimsical but potent authority to name the human with its disingenuous proscriptions? These are valid concerns, yet at the same time the escalation of claims to the moral and ethical premises to support the recognition of translatable difference within a cosmopolitan humanist framework are notable (cf. Appiah, 2005; Gilroy, 2000; Hill, 2000). So, arriving at the analytical threshold of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'radical doubt' where tracing and locating oneself within the historical process of producing ideas disturbs the extent to which one can *know* and *do* in utter certainty (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 235–48), the predicament of difference entails building the necessary resources to interrogate our own examination of difference and its implications. This reflexive theoretical practice is pursued by Stuart Hall's (1988) exemplary questioning of the political defensibility of claims to difference in his declaration of the end of the 'essential black subject' and its recourse to the moral authority of 'innocence' as insulation from (auto)critique which is mirrored in other notable critiques of cultural absolutism (Bhatt, 1997; Wieviorka, 1995). So, where does this leave us? Following Hall, it leaves us without the 'old' political certainties of mass identification and the concomitant positions they are supposed to yield; we face the work of 'thinking through and living with difference' under our own ethico-political compass 'without guarantees'.

This special issue, therefore, confronts the *predicament* of difference as it presents itself in two key senses. First, there is the arduous task of negotiating and dealing with the substantive 'problem(s)' borne of the

proliferation of identities and differences in the social field – such as the requisite balance between particular ethno-religious claims with a secular ideal of public interest. Second, the difficulty of arriving at an analytically nuanced and sound concept of difference – especially given its conceptual malleability and appropriation to disparate political ends. At a literal level, this predicament is manifest in multicultural nation states' negotiation of difference and the process/possibility of incorporating ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversity within the singular polity. While this is the fundamental multicultural social problematic, its plural, liberal, conservative, corporate and commercial variations indicate the complexity of the problem as substantive *and* analytical (cf. Goldberg, 1994; Bennett, 1998). In this sense, as the normative and descriptive connotations of difference have merged, its explanatory capacity becomes increasingly complex and uncertain. For example, cultural racists take difference as an insurmountable problem that fuels social conflict. Liberal multiculturalists advocate the assimilation of difference into the 'host society' and 'majority culture'. Plural multiculturalists regard difference as the starting point for observing and maintaining the sacrosanct distinctiveness of groups. And cosmopolitans understand difference as particular cultural variations that are – or ought to be – accessible to all without fear or favour.

The special issue engages the predicament of difference through a combination of theoretical and empirical articles that address a wide range of geopolitical locales, conditions and themes. By considering the social and analytical implications of difference as a political resource or currency, the issue aims to offer a valuable critical reflection on its Janus-faced character and problematical implications for theory and practice alike. Ien Ang's article considers the efforts by Sydney's largest art museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) to fulfil its remit to represent and reflect the cultural diversity of the city through the production of art exhibitions which can be conceived as catering to the needs and interests of ethno-specific audiences. The article points to a series of enduring and embryonic tensions such as disputes over the authenticity of its exhibition of Buddhist art as a valid artistic enterprise and the limited success of the gallery to become fully responsive and accessible to its multicultural constituency. Ang argues that this testifies to the void between an enabling institutional will to fuller multicultural recognition, representation, and participation and the restrictive sensibilities entrenched within Eurocentric perceptions of aesthetic form and artistic appreciation. The predicament of difference here then is articulated in the contradictory effects of the cultural politics of difference on the operation of western cultural institutions such as art museums as sites of cultural power: while the recognition of difference may be a salutary conduit for the democratization of what has traditionally been an elite institution, this very move also tends to incorporate difference within the existing framework of the museum, hence enhancing and

updating rather than diminishing its authority. At the same time, however, once difference has been incorporated, it also tends to dilute the original vision of what an art museum is and should be. One consequence of the predicament of difference, then, is an increasing uncertainty in what the future holds for these central institutions of cultural modernity.

The question of why the 'problem' of how to display 'Asian art' does not open up a similar reflexive exercise for curators of 'conventional' exhibitions implied within Ang's essay is addressed in Denise Ferreira da Silva's article. Silva begins with a concern over the contemporary 'officialization' of the politics of difference that demands racial and cultural representation without fully explicating their ontological and epistemological premises. In addressing this, Silva develops a theoretical account of the (modern) human subject that is 'transparent' yet knowable through the 'difference' that is represented culturally and racially. Reading the lyrics of Brazilian group Olodum, Silva identifies a representation of African-ness that is situated within ongoing political struggles and contesting claims to the status of transparent, historical (black) subject. Silva concludes by stating the futility of recognizing a historically grounded racial subject, pointing instead to the productive exclusionary work performed by the racial and cultural concepts that now enlist racial subalterns as western cultural insiders in order to underscore the presumed inassimilable difference as embodied, for example, within Islam. This provides a clear account of the predicament of difference: claims for racial and cultural representation within the logic of inclusion evacuate the ethical demands of considering the political basis of the subject to be recognized and included, and recognition and inclusion is taken as enough in and of itself without a reflection upon the political effects of such representation.

This attentiveness to the constitutive as well as contradictory force of difference in its cohering and fracturing of racial collectives is taken up in Brett St Louis's article. St Louis considers how the relationship between sameness and difference within the register of race produces the customary effects of racialization, reifying race and obscuring racism. St Louis explores this effect as emerging within intra-racial group struggles for recognition and representation using the contestation of 'African American' identity amongst 'native-born' and 'foreign-born' black populations in the United States. The article points out how, within an important strand of native-born African American self-image, the positive symbolic resonance of Africa is not only lauded as the basis of a diasporic black cultural distinctiveness but also contested within material contexts, where 'foreign-born' blacks are sometimes cast as parasitical profiteers of previous ('native-born') civil rights struggles and aggressive competitors for limited socioeconomic resources and opportunities. In evaluating this, St Louis argues that the reification of racial difference and sameness is also taken to offer a causal explanation for racism and racial stratification that eclipses important

socioeconomic factors. Ultimately, this is considered as presenting an acute predicament of difference: caught between the Scylla of endlessly deferred meaning and the Charybdis of reified sameness which questions whether an appeal to racial sameness and differentiation is ethically sustainable in the long term.

The issue of authenticity and belonging central to this debate is explored in Jo Haynes's essay through the consideration of cultural consumption, specifically 'world music'. Haynes draws attention to the ambivalence of a set of tensions and contradictions, opportunities and possibilities within the production and consumption of 'world music'. Using rich ethnographic material gathered from a series of key 'cultural intermediaries' within the world music community, the article uses the operation of difference within contradictory registers of hybridity and syncretism, as well as notions of authentic and rooted cultural tradition tied to particularistic identities as a point of departure. Haynes considers the complexity of how world music is imagined, produced, marketed, consumed and reflected upon across these 'structures of feeling' to present an especially delicate predicament. As a commodity, world music at times depends on reified forms of difference, for example the fetishization of exoticized musicians, 'traditions', and locales as 'primordial' sources in an attempt to stimulate product distinctiveness and sales. However, at the same time, Haynes notes the cultural literacy of typical world music cultural intermediaries and consumers that alerts them to this commercialized ethnic stylization as reiterating enduring racial archetypes and the asymmetrical structures and relations of power that (re)produce them. Haynes thus valuably points to a reflexive form of cosmopolitan engagement with difference that confronts its own constitutive dilemma of a respect for the integrity of cultural specificity, commitment to sincere forms of cultural exchange, and opposition to the illusory justifications of cultural authenticity and exclusivity.

In an empirical study of difference-in-action, Greg Gow's article develops a thick, descriptive account of multicultural living in the Fairfield locality of Sydney. Building on conceptual accounts of the 'global city', the article points out how 'difference' acts as an axis for action as a highly heterogeneous group come together to negotiate the organization of their shared living space and promote a multicultural politics recognizing the specific conditions of refugees. Gow identifies a void between the formal-institutional understanding of belonging in relation to citizenship, naturalization or right-of-residence and a practical, grounded version of local situatedness that emanates from everyday interaction and communal involvement. This usefully contributes towards an understanding of the predicament of difference in the vivid portrait of 'togetherness in difference' that it presents. In ethnographically drawing attention to the pluralist-multiculturalist problematic, Gow presents a series of disputes, negotiations, and performances of identities (individual and collective)

taking place alongside the demands of civic life as meaningfully mundane. Taken outside of the analytical and political realm held hostage to the endless play of difference and the impracticality of its comfortable resolution, Gow offers a glimpse of authentic democracy as 'the sound of people actually negotiating their differences in the open, behind the collective program' (Hall, 1991b: 65).

This special issue also features a review symposium that engages this problematic from a range of geopolitical locations, disciplinary and methodological approaches, and substantive concerns. In response to a précis of the predicament of difference, crudely put, as the messy question of its form (what 'difference' *is*) and its effects (what 'difference' *does*), the contributors generate informative snapshots of difference as discursive and practised. Ellen Rooney begins with an incisive contribution that points to the avoidance of understanding differences as play and position through its commercial simplification and reification that results in a perverse fixation with a choice between different distinct differences; this avoidance of its imbrications renders differences as totalities to be found and not made which misunderstands the meanings of differences as determining and generative instead of emergent through practice. Lisa Lowe's contribution is an attentive reflection on relational difference as a distinctive effect of the Weberian comparative method that legitimates pernicious distinctions between modernized, civilized, and racialized populations that she suggests ought to be reconsidered through a genealogical approach sensitive to the 'entanglements' and 'intimacies' of 'difference'. In their response, Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess critique the temporalizing of difference within western hierarchies of human and civilizational difference and their biopolitical principles and projects that have now led us to an uncritical acceptance of modernized 'societal culture' as a precondition to an inclusive participatory democratic liberal multiculturalism. Here, difference is simply relegated to the past (and hence, arguably, declared redundant). Finally, developing an example from the Singaporean case, Chua Beng Huat points to the emphasis on racial difference – between Chinese, Malays, and Indians – as a central regulatory principle in a state-imposed multiculturalism: while eschewing the liberal foundation of western multiculturalisms and the maelstrom of problems that ensue, this variant produces some dilemmas of its own.

All of this leaves us in an uncertain position as to how we might make sense of 'difference'. Is it simply now a new orthodoxy that might be assessed as inconsequential yet (relatively) benign, not really upsetting or transgressing existing hegemonic relations of power? Is it a shibboleth whose rapacious reproduction signals its descriptive and analytical exhaustion? Or does its continuing social and discursive effectivity signal a propitious moment and opportunity to engage more profoundly with the political problems of equality and freedom that have exercised our modern

political imaginations, especially in light of the divisive forces of globalization and the retreat from multiculturalism evident in so many western nation states today? This range of practical possibilities and the ethical reflection that they invite constitute what we recognize as the predicament of difference. What, if anything, can/does 'difference' offer us? Bearing the struggles of the subjugated peoples of modernity in mind, Edouard Glissant (1989) remarks that social differentiation has come into existence against tremendous repressive forces and at great human cost. In this vein, the recognition of egalitarian human diversity against the stultifying myth of racial and national supremacy continues to hold great promise for a historical appreciation of our hybrid interconnectivity and recognition of our cosmopolitan social world (Harris, 1999). In this sense, despite all its incoherence and machinations, the politics of difference still offers something positive, signalling our social plurality while encouraging and eliciting respect, however ambivalently, evident culturally within everyday forms of sincere civility elegantly characterized as 'cosmopolitanism from below' (Gilroy, 2004).

The new cultural politics of difference (which is no longer so new) is a distinct legacy of the 20th-century *fin de siècle*. If Hall suggests that 'living with and working through difference' is a pivotal dilemma for the 21st-century, what does it mean in a century that has begun with a series of global events which are clearly having watershed consequences for the politics of difference? Hall's pronouncements were made before September 11 and its aftermath, the 'war on terrorism', and hence before the forceful push toward a new Manichean absolutizing and hegemonizing of a singular dichotomic difference – 'if you are not for us you are against us' – sweeping across the globe. It is against this ominous fundamentalizing background that the possibilities and promises of a heterogeneous world – a world of multiple, intersecting and dynamic differences – continue to be worth pursuing.

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